

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE July 6, 2009

USCIRF Sends Letter to President Obama Regarding Russia Visit

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The following letter was sent to President Obama on Thursday July 2, prior to his visit to Russia.

July 2, 2009

The President The White House Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. President,

I write on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent U.S. government commission established by Congress to monitor religious freedom worldwide and make policy recommendations to the executive and legislative branches. We respectfully urge you to raise human rights concerns, including freedom of religion or belief, in your upcoming meeting with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev.

For ten years the Commission has reported on the status of freedom of religion or belief in Russia, and this year the Commission decided to add Russia to its Watch List. This decision was based on several negative new policies and trends, particularly the establishment in early 2009 of a new body in the Ministry of Justice with unprecedented powers to recommend measures to control religious groups. There also are increasing violations of religious freedom by government officials, particularly against allegedly “non-traditional” religious groups and Muslims, based on the government’s interpretation and application of Russian laws, such as on religious organizations, non-governmental organizations, and extremism. Russian officials continue to describe certain religious and other groups as alien to Russian culture and society, and there has been a sharp rise in xenophobia and intolerance, including anti-Semitism, resulting in numerous violent attacks and other crimes. The Russian government has chronically failed to address these serious problems adequately, consistently, or effectively.

We ask that you raise with President Medvedev serious U.S. concerns about the Ministry of Justice’s new Expert Council on Religious Studies. The Expert Council was given wide powers to recommend investigations of religious organizations, including their activities and literature, for numerous reasons, including extremism. While governments have a duty to combat direct incitement to imminent violence and acts of violent extremism as part of their obligation to protect citizens, there are reasons for serious concern over the establishment, composition, and expansive mandate of this new Council. The Council’s chairman, Aleksandr Dvorkin, is Russia’s most prominent “anti-cult” activist and he lacks academic credentials as a religion specialist. Dvorkin’s deputy, Roman Silantyev, is noted for his overbroad characterizations of what constitutes radical Islam. Observers are concerned that under Dvorkin’s leadership, the Council may call for the closure of registered organizations, including Evangelical Protestant and Jehovah’s Witnesses communities, and unregistered minority religious communities, particularly the Council of Churches Baptists. Ominously, the Russian Bible Society was highlighted in a discussion during the first meeting of the Council.

The sharp deterioration in the human rights climate appears to be a direct consequence of the authoritarian stance of the Russian government, as well as the growing influence of chauvinistic groups in Russian society, which seem to be tolerated by the government. We encourage you to highlight the importance of fair and effective methods of combating acts of violent extremism, including towards religious minorities, as a priority issue.

In connection, over the past several years, a major threat to religious freedom has emerged in

the Russian government's amendment and application of the country's anti-extremism law, which defines extremist activity in a religious context. As is the case in many other countries, the Russian government faces major challenges as it addresses acts of terrorism that claim a religious linkage, while also protecting freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. However, NGOs and human rights activists report numerous cases of Muslims being prosecuted for extremism or terrorism even though the individuals had no apparent relation to such activities. Such policies toward Russian Muslims, which constitute the country's second largest religious community, risk increasing instability and exacerbating radicalism. We hope that you will find a way to convince the Russian government to adopt new policies to more effectively address security concerns as well as the problems faced by the country's diverse ethnic and religious groups, particularly in the North Caucasus region.

Thank you for your attention to these issues. Raising U.S. concerns about the retreat away from fundamental freedoms would make clear the United States' commitment to human rights and religious freedom in our bilateral relationship with the Russian Federation.

Sincerely,

Leonard Leo Chair